FICTION

Nelson Lambert, "Britain and the Corsair Raids," *Acta Militaria*, 28 September 2012. URL: https://nelsonlambert.blogspot.com/2012/09/britain-and-corsair-raids.html

For centuries the bane of the Christian Mediterranean were the Barbary pirates or Corsairs from Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli. Entire populations and islands were depopulated as Muslim fleets raided year after year to harvest the populations there. The rich would be ransomed, but the poor were destined to live out the rest of their lives as slaves. It´s estimated that between 1530 and 1780 1-1.25 million Europeans were taken as slaves to North Africa, as well as about 20 million Africans up to 1900.

Most of the European slaves came from Italy and Spain, but about **20,000 British and Irish suffered the same fate**. Many of these were were kidnapped sailors Records are incomplete, but show 466 vessels taken between just 1609 and 1616, whilst 160 British ships were captured by the Algerians alone between 1677 and 1680. In 1641 the John Filmer, was taken just outside Cork, the crew taken to Algiers, whilst in 1656 seven fishing boats and 42 men were kidnapped near Falmouth.

As well as plundering the seas almost at will, during the 17th century the Barbary fleets even landed on both the British and Irish coasts on slaving expeditions.

The Raids The 17th century was the high point of Barbary piracy in the Atlantic.

1625 In August a Barbary fleet hit Sussex, Plymouth (where 27 ships were taken) and all along the south coast.

In 1627 Lundy Island in the Bristol channel was not only raided but became effectively **an Ottoman naval base for the next 5 years.** The pirate commander was not a Barbary at all - like many pirates (see below) he was a European renegade, **a Dutchman named Jan Janszoon van Haarlem, or Murad Reis.** ***How did Jan become an Ottoman?***

In 1631, in the biggest single attack on the British isles, **Murad Reis took the entire population of Baltimore, County Cork, into slavery.** These were mainly English settlers who had set up a pilchard industry there, as well as Irish villagers. Of the 108 taken only three, at most, returned. ***Wrong – he took only Irish; he probably did it at the request of the local English.***

In 1636 the Justices of the Peace sitting in Bodmin recorded how the fishermen of Looe in Cornwall "through terror of that misery where unto these persons are carried by these cruel infidels" would rather "give over their trade than put their estates and persons into so great peril, there being now 60 vessels and about 200 seamen without employment". "These Turks daily show themselves at St. Keverne, Mount's Bay, and other places, that the poor fishermen are fearful not only to go to the seas, but likewise lest these Turks should come on shore and take them out of their houses".

During the English civil war, with the country in chaos, there are many references to "Turkish" pirates along the Cornish coast. Ships were taken in open view of the coast, even close to big ports like Penzance.

Another cycle of landings took place between 1655 and 1660. striking England and even Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The English Calender of State Papers for June 1656 quotes the captain of a Plymouth barge arriving at St. Keverne in Cornwall "where he heard it credibly reported, with sorrowful complaint and lamentable tears of women and children, that on the 15th instant three fisherboats belonging to St. Keverne, three others of Helford, and one more of Mollan (Mullion) and about 50 men in them, being on the coast fishing between Falnouth and the Lizard were taken by the Turks who carried both men and boats away."

The Barbary Pirates and their slaves

The traditional ship of the Barbary pirates was the galley, fast and manoeuvrable, and well suited for raiding. Galleys however had two problems. Firstly they were labour intensive, but that was hardly an issue in this case. Secondly they were not well suited to the rough waters of the Atlantic. They could go there, and did, but this was one reason why early attacks were limited to the Mediterranean.

This started to change with the influx of a new type of pirate, the Renegade, Christians, or rather sailors from Christian states, who "turned Turk" in search of a fast buck, their ships and local knowledge allowed the Barbary states to raid even up to Iceland. It's noticeable how religion was both central and irrelevant to the whole business. Muslims were technically not allowed to enslave other Muslims, which is why slaves were were harvested from non_Muslim lands like Europe and Africa. And conversion away from Islam carried the death penalty, as applies even now in more primitive parts of the world. But there was very little pressure to ensure that conversion to Islam had to be sincere. Of course if these renegades were caught by Christian powers, they would be harshly treated, especially by the Spanish Inquisition.

Jack Ward was started his career as a fisherman, probably from Faversham in Kent. He swiftly became a privateer, a sort of licensed pirate, for Elizabeth 1st, but when the James 1st ended privateering Jack started on his own account. Starting small, stealing a 25 ton barque from Portsmouth harbour, Ward soon traded up and was soon in control of a proper 32 gun gun warship, which named The Gift, which he used to make a nuisance of himself in the Mediterranean. **Ward was based in Sale on the Moroccan coast, with various other English and Dutch pirates, but in 1606 is entered into a formal agreement with the ruler of Tunis to use Tunis as a safe haven in return for 20% of his catch. It was in Tunis that Ward, turned Muslim, adopting the name Yusif Reis, and rising to command a Tunisian squadron including an ex-Venetian 60 gunner. It is Jack Ward who is credited with introducing square rigged to the Barbary States, heavily armed and better suited to Atlantic operations. He died in 1622.** ***It was the Dutch Simon de Danser who is given that credit.***

Though English, Jack Ward seems to have mainly operated in the Mediterranean. Jan Janszoon van Haarlem was ventured further afield. **He began as a Dutch privateer**, ***source?*** but the whole point of a privateer was that he restricted his piracy to one enemy, the Spanish. ~~Deciding this was insufficiently profitable, Janszoon sailed foe the Mediterranean, and the life of a pirate. he was successful before being captured by rival Barbary pirates in 1618 and taken to Algiers. This however was a blessing in disguise, he~~

~~knew one of the Algerian captains, another Dutchman, and promptly "turning Turk" he started another career as an Algerian corsair with the name Murad Reis. This didn't last long, mainly because Algiers had started accepting protection money from various European countries in return for immunity from attack. This hardly suited Janszoon / Murad and, as Ward had done, he sailed for the pirate port of Sale~~.

Sale, was on Morocco's Atlantic coast, far from the capital and only nominally under Moroccan control. It was the Tortuga of Africa, a major pirate centre. **In 1619 the 14 most important pirate leaders declared Sale an independent republic, with Janszoon as President, and chief admiral. This obviously enraged the Moroccan sultan,** ***(so much so he appointed Jan his admiral of Sale on 1622)*** **but his attempt to take back the city in 1624 was repulsed.** However by 1627 Janszoon seems to decided it was time to move on. He set up a base on Lundy Island in the Bristol channel (so much for the Royal Navy of the time) which he maintained for 5 years, and launched a long voyage to the north Atlantic, capturing slaves from Iceland and Danish ships. **When he tried to attack the Danish headquarters on Iceland he was repulsed by cannon fire** ***(source?)*** and a force of lancers organised and waiting on the beach, but he picked up 108 slaves in the raid on Baltimore above.

At the end of 1627 Janszoon moved the centre of his operation back to Algiers, and thereafter concentrated on the more lucrative Mediterranean trade. He is known to have favoured a type of ship called a polacca, which combines a lanteen sail in front with a square rig behind. The point here is that a lanteen sail is more manoeuvrable, whilst the square rig was faster, especially in the Atlantic. So either or both could be used depending on the circumstances. **The polaccas of Murad Reis were big enough to carry about 75 men, with 20 cannons.**

Not all slaves were treated the same of course. If rich or important they were ransomed, but for the rest a life of slavery awaited. Women were often thrown into a harem, whilst many men became galley slaves, powering ships to capture yet more slaves. During the winter these slaves were put to work on state projects, quarrying stone or constructing new galleys. Food for galley slaves was 2 or 3 small loaves of poor bread per day, and there was one change of clothes per year.

As the European powers grew stronger militarily they began to fight back against the Barbary corsairs, but it was not until the 1830s that the menace was finally ended. That's for another time.

Posted by Nelson